

# Reform Judaism In 1000 Words: Chanukah



## Context

*Chanukah has become one of the most well-known festivals of the Jewish calendar. Yet this is a relatively new phenomenon, and is no doubt impacted by the festivals proximity to other festivals! As British Jews, however, we can really appreciate the delight of celebrating a festival of lights at the darkest and coldest time of year. In fact Chanukah is timed to coincide with not just the shortest days, but the darkest nights, when the moon is at its slimmest. As **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers**, Community Educator at **Reform Judaism** points out below, the miracle of lights is a relatively late addition to the Chanukah story, but the universal message of the need to bring light in dark times is one that is easy to elevate and to ring true through the ages.*

## Content

My strongest childhood memories tend to revolve around two festivals, Pesach, and Chanukah. I particularly remember begging my parents for a Christmas tree and receiving a Chanukah bush which consisted of a silver, spray painted dead branch from the garden, with homemade Magen Davids and *chanukiyot* hanging on it. Despite being one of the least important festivals in the Jewish calendar (unlike the lesser known Shavuot, which is one of the central Pilgrim Festivals), Chanukah has increasingly become the pinnacle of the Jewish year not just for young children who crave fairy lights and presents, but for their parents too.

Chanukah is a festival of miracles. However it doesn't appear anywhere in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, and the stories of the Maccabees (probably written down 30-60 years after the events) were preserved for us in the Apocryphal Christian literature that falls between the old and new testaments. These stories describe the incredible military victory of a tiny guerrilla army against the might of the oppressive Greek Empire – a victory that is easy to see as miraculous. The Hasmonean army (including the Maccabees) were battling against religious oppression, assimilation, and a seemingly unshakable empire. The first Chanukah that was celebrated was a delayed Sukkot, missed during a hard fought battle, hence the eight day festival. The first reliable mention of the miracle of the eight days of oil that we are so familiar with is in the Talmud, around 500CE, some 600-700 years after the Maccabees. The ancient Rabbis found a way of adding spiritual meaning at the darkest time of the year, just as they did for so many other festivals that needed new meaning after the destruction of the Temple. Constant re-invention is not a new innovation to the Jewish way of life!

In 2011 there was some controversy caused over an ill thought out ad campaign in the USA. Aimed at ex-pat Israelis, it was encouraging them to return home. In one of the adverts a young girl is shown chatting on skype to her grandparents in Israel. They ask her what the next festival is, and she excitedly replies 'Christmas' – the implication seems to be that if you stay away from Israel too long, your children will lose their Jewish knowledge and identities, not a notion American Jewry took very well, and with good reason. Chanukah, as with all festivals, has naturally imbibed, over the years, customs and values of the cultures in which Jews have lived. *Sufganiyot*, or doughnuts, vary around the world depending on what the local excessively sweet, deep fried snack is. Yet more recently issues of cultural negotiation around Chanukah and Christmas are becoming increasingly difficult to navigate, which is perhaps appropriate when our relationship with secular culture is a crucial part of the Chanukah story. The Jews of the Chanukah story were suddenly faced with the challenge of negotiating Greek-Assyrian culture and potential total assimilation to new customs, dress and philosophy. Greek names became common among Jews, and we are presented with stories of the extremes; of those who held fast onto everything and were willing to face annihilation to

protect their traditions and laws, or those who were happy to abandon everything to appear in Greek sporting events (where men ran naked, and would be easy to identify as different). There aren't many middle-ways discussed in the Chanukah story.

Yet undoubtedly there were also those who engaged with Greek philosophy and thought, met with their neighbours at the local markets, and still continued to study and engage with Jewish texts and stories, and to worship as Jews. Finding ways to balance our western lives and philosophy with that which is compelling and meaningful to us about our Judaism is a central part of the Chanukah tale, and is not a reality we find ourselves grappling with today for the first time in Jewish history. Chanukah is a festival that exemplifies our ability to hold in balance our cultural, national, and religious identities. We all do it in different ways, but Chanukah presents incredible opportunities for us to really engage with living as proud Jews in a non-Jewish society. We are asked to place our Chanukiyah in a window where it is visible, unless it would be unsafe to do so. We witness the miracle of Chanukah to the outside world, and have been welcomed to do so by local communities, as well as local and national Governments, with public Chanukiah lightings, in small villages and in Trafalgar Square. This is an opportunity to be very public in our Jewish observance, to share it with those around us, and to occupy a place in the world that sometimes we might have shied away from.

Chanukah literally means the festival of dedication, as it celebrates the rededicated of the temple, so although we know we are always holding in balance our various identities, Chanukah is also an opportunity to re-dedicate ourselves to our Judaism. 'Chinukh' is a word often used to demarcate Jewish education, but it shares its root with 'Chanukah', and so means 'to dedicate'. Being educated, or indeed educating, in Judaism, isn't about merely the absorption of knowledge, but about somehow discovering how to feel ourselves dedicated. How we commit ourselves to what is meaningful in this ancient tradition today will be different for all of us, but even engaging in the question is a beginning. So this Chanukah, while munching on our doughnuts and latkes, let's ask ourselves what it is that we wish to dedicate ourselves to. Let's begin to challenge ourselves to think about what it is that we find compelling, perhaps even transformative, in our Judaism, and how we might devote ourselves to this, creating powerful Jewish memories for ourselves and our families, not only at the festival of dedication, but in a Judaism that we feel dedicated to all year round. This takes hard work, and the time to learn and engage ourselves in the task of making meaningful, informed choices about what we wish to make of our Judaism, and how we will be part of a Judaism that future generations also want to be dedicated to.

## **Contemplation**

*It is easy to feel excited about Chanukah – fried food, candle light, gifts, chocolate money, games and songs, and we don't even need to take a day off work! For many it might seem like the Jewish answer to Christmas, and there is a lot to learn about how we hold Jewish life and secular (or Greek) life in balance, but there is a larger challenge for us here – how will we make Chanukah (and Sukkot, and Shavuot, and Rosh Hashanah) a part of our Jewish life that bring us together as a community, and bring us personal meaning too? Can we really balance a child's demands for gifts and fairy lights with a deeper understanding of what it means to be dedicated to our Judaism, our responsibility to bring light to the world, and the challenge of living as both Jewish and British? How will you take steps this Chanukah to engage with the meaning and the spirituality of Chanukah, as well as the joy of consumption and seasonal parties?*